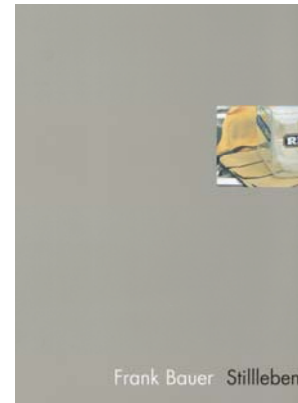


## Stilleben

A conversation between Sabine B. Vogel and Frank Bauer Düsseldorf.

**Sabine B. Vogel:** You have studied arts with Gerhard Richter at the Düsseldorf Arts Academy. Where would you draw the line between yourself and your teacher?



**Frank Bauer:** The simplest answer is that Richter hardly ever paints still lifes.

I do use the painting styles which I learned from Richter but only where they fit in as a pictorial element. I deliberately did not develop a special style, e.g. a special brush stroke or the like. My pictures are intended to be impersonal in their painting, no painterly gestures, no intellectual encoding, the pictures are not fraught with allegories. Above all, painterly craftsmanship must not conceal the components of the subject matter.

**SBV:** The subject of your still lifes are moments of your own life; you first take a photograph of them and then you transfer them onto the canvas. Do you always know beforehand whether a motive is a potential copy for your next picture? By which criteria do you choose your motives?

**FB:** I often take pictures for their own sake and I do exhibit them, too. For my still lifes, I sometimes combine several photographs to avoid the different focal levels within a photograph. I practically always know beforehand whether a motive is of interest to me as a painted picture or not.

On the one hand, I use formal criteria for selecting a motive, like composition, light, colour, diversity of textures and picture planes. On the other hand, there is always a personal reason, because after all I want to convey something that goes beyond the purely formal aspect. I find it difficult to precisely explain these rather intuitive decisions, it is easier for me to say so in retrospect than in prospect.

Taking a look at all my still lifes to date, starting with the "kitchen sink pictures", I can tell that it is chaos which fascinates me. The same sort of chaos which has also fascinated me in Pollock's pictures, chaos as the basic structure of the unconscious -

a random distribution of objects, with no outside interference to arrange things aesthetically. Because of the very motive of the kitchen sink pictures, I can eschew any compositional control and take myself out of the picture to a point where I am not even the creator of this distribution of objects any longer - like in the case of the backstage pictures or the party pictures.

It is this state of being a sleeping partner that has always interested me; in a way, the pictures are mute witnesses of a certain passing moment, an unrepeatable and apparently arbitrary moment, and then, all of a sudden, by painting them in oil, this moment is being put on the pedestal of „eternity" thus creating a tension, as I hope.

I am hardly interested in the subject matter of the objects themselves, what interests me is the encounter between direct personal associations and the utmost arbitrariness of an arrangement. That is why the still lifes do not have a centre, often the objects easily slide out of the picture and are cut off at the edges. I am not Morandi who arranges his objects in such a way that they become poetic in the picture.

**SBV:** Are the still lifes also a consequence of your party-going lifestyle?

**FB:** No, but nevertheless there is a certain connection. If life is the only source of inspiration for a painter, then you must make sure that you lead an interesting life - which does not mean, however, that you show off as a 'professional' adolescent. It is rather a matter of having as many impressions as possible, of avoiding to beat just one track, e.g. to stay at home and point kitchen sinks forever.

**SBV:** But you could also ask friends to take pictures for you in the late hours of a party. Would that make a difference?

**FB:** Yes, very much so, because to be in touch with a situation I have experienced myself is very important for me.

The backstage pictures originated in 1995 from a desire to establish a closer connection between the pictures and my own life. I go to a lot of musical concerts, and sometimes go behind the scenes afterwards. What matters is the kind of life you lead, the impressions you have, the music you listen to, the books you read, in a word: the way you think.

**SBV:** Why did you choose still lifes as a genre?

**FB:** At the beginning of my studies I wanted to make 'modern art'. The results were horrible; I just pointed anything, with-out thinking about it and without understanding it. At that moment, still lifes gave me an opportunity to 'start again from scratch', they constituted an avenue on which the concept of modernness become completely insignificant and then somehow came into play automatically, not because of any theory but rather by intuition.

Still lifes are extremely fraught, extremely old-fashioned, but I continue to consider this a challenge. There are three major groups in painting: landscapes, portraits, and still lifes, and I am interested in still lifes, because they provide a very tight framework which nevertheless, or just because of this, allows a lot of leeway. In an area without a frame, I would perish in view of the great Now diversity of possibilities. I am thinking for example of Mike Kelley whom I find a very good pointer. I have seen works by Kelley in Hamburg - they were incredibly impressive. But for me, this form of art is out of the question, I need a frame.

**SBV:** Do you believe that your still lifes are perceived as mirrors of a certain time, as narrations of a certain attitude to life?

**FB:** Yes, I would love that very much, but not only because in a hundred years time these pictures automatically will have something nostalgic about them, because by then a lot of the things depicted in them will no longer exist, or their design will have changed. The effect I am thinking of does appear when you look at early works by Spoerri or Nam June Paik which nowadays are old-fashioned, yet timelessly modern.

But there is also a danger to it, i.e. that you create pictures which do reflect the zeitgeist, but which will be intolerably old-fashioned by tomorrow already - although this may vary from one spectator to the next. My hope is that my pictures contain things, and above all thoughts, which will still be of interest in 50 years time. Not only because of nostalgia, but because they communicate an attitude to life which goes beyond the present time. I wish I could be able to stand aloof of the times, in other words: I would like my pictures to have the same quality as those moments in a feature film where, all of a sudden, the film stops and an oft voice tells a story or a poem or a sentence, something which suddenly gives the still picture a significance it never would have acquired in the flow of the film, a flare-up at the level of the unconscious which strikes a chord that you did not know before.

## I.

In an interview, Frank Bauer calls still lifes extremely old-fashioned - a pretty haphazard remark, yet very much to the point. There is hardly any other art genre which we associate so directly with past centuries and past fashions. Still lifes are short-circuited and associated with just a handful of motives, ordinary objects, bowls, glasses, fruit. When people talk of still lifes in the 20th century, in most cases they refer to photography as a medium. Why does a young artist paint still lifes today, and why can this interest be so fascinating?

## II.

Still lifes force the spectator to concentrate on the object, and the history of still lifes has brought about a development which Max Imdahl has called the liberation of painting from the abstract preconception of things. The conceptual understanding of the object gradually retreats behind the richness of the colour shades - "Viewing itself (becomes) an experience" (Imdahl, Complete Works, Vol. 3, ,Pictorial image and period consciousness?", page 524). This period has come to an end. So why should objects stand out once again in isolation, why should a painter leave the entire surface of the picture to them?

Bauer's still lifes depict everyday situations. Whether it is heaps of dirty dishes on the kitchen sink, leftovers on the breakfast table, or bottles in disarray at midnight - the situations he depicts are side events, everyday events, passing events that emerge almost unnoticed, since usually it is just a question of orderliness how soon you put an end to the whole situation. Or it depends on your mood for how long you allow these arrangements to continue to grow. Bauer does not arrange his motives, he does not invent things in disarray, nor does he recompose everyday life. He takes pictures of a moment and transfers the photograph onto the canvas. And it is at this point that a first answer to my introductory question sets in. Whether exhibited as a photograph, even if extremely magnified, and maybe even if elevated in a viewing box, or not, it would always remain what it is: a passing moment, even though captured, but taken haphazardly out of thousands of other possible and very similar moments. Its transfer onto the canvas, and last but not least, the framework of a genre with a long tradition, however, bestows steadiness onto the moment. A steadiness which apparently is strong enough to stand up to the repetitions that occur in real life. Because how else would you explain the fact that most probably every collector's household is constantly busy tidying up leftovers from the breakfast table and clearing away heaps of dishes,

while at the same time these very situations, two-dimensionally and in the form of a painting, are quietly hanging on the wall all the time.

### III.

Spectators who are perhaps more interested in conceptual art might be irritated by the directness of the still lifes. Quite traditionally, Bauer's still lifes contain bowls, glasses, and fruit. Elements which, of course, are pictorial elements in their own right, but which, in the viewer's eyes, are always competing with, or at least delimitating themselves from their precursors from the 16th to the 19th century. Bauer's glasses are neither full of exquisite details or precious, like in Kalf's still lifes, nor are they simple objects like in Cezanne's still lifes. Here we have a juxtaposition of unselected, ordinary things that tell a tale of cheerful parties and opulent breakfasts and reveal individual preferences for specific types of mayonnaise. They are random items, they are mass products like the product range in a supermarket. It is not Pop Art's interest in consumer goods, nor is it noble art combined with popular motives, nor are they moments to be decoded symbolically or iconographically, they are moments like in a diary, without highlights, that replenish an art genre which had been almost written off.

The revival of this old-fashioned genre plays with the contrast of the expectations that it raises. Instead of showing serenity and composure, the cups and pans are sliding out of the picture; instead of being isolated heroes, objects are crowding around each other; instead of focusing on one situation, we see a promising section of a bustling encounter. The backstage pictures which actually depict the by-product of the main event, i.e. the performance on stage, are a consequence of this revival of an old genre. Or conversely the 'Groka' pictures. Not only advertisers, every greengrocer and supermarket manager arranges his products to please the spectator's eyes. Still lifes are being staged in shop windows and on banquet tables. Bauer brings still lifes back to the arts. Like sketchy entries in a diary, the pictures are telling the tale of life - entries that do not tell a personal story, but allow things to speak for themselves. Unpretentious and without pathos, the genre finds its way back from everyday life into the arts.

Sabine B. Vogel

## **Originally published by Galerie Voss 1997**

Mühlengasse 3

D-40213 Düsseldorf

**Phone:** +49-211-13 49 82

**Fax:** +49-211-13 34 00

**Email:** [vossgallery@t-online.de](mailto:vossgallery@t-online.de)

**Web:** <http://www.galerievoss.de>